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REMARKS BY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS-DESIGNATE THOMAS A. SHANNON AT BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC STUDIES (BISS)

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Good afternoon. Thank you for joining me today, on what is my first trip to Bangladesh.

I am particularly excited to visit just a few days before the commemoration of Victory Day.

Great struggles for freedom, democracy, and hope have often come at great cost – and it was no different for Bangladesh.

Shortly after that struggle ended, Senator Ted Kennedy came to Dhaka to address a newly free and democratic nation. He delivered an urgent, simple, and genuine message: “I have come here to say that America cares.”

Today, the vibrancy and color of Bangladesh is matched only by its citizens’ entrepreneurial spirit, and its ability to achieve impressive economic growth and foster innovation from Tetulia to Teknaf. This is a country the world listens to, whether on peacekeeping, climate change, or counter-terrorism.

And time has proven Senator Kennedy right: over four-plus decades, the United States government has invested billions of dollars to improve the lives of Bangladeshis – helping to grow more food; build more roads; and train more skilled teachers, health care providers, and soldiers.

Thousands of Bangladeshis now pursue higher education in America, and many return to apply their new knowledge and skills for their country's benefit. Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis call the United States home, and they are Bangladesh's third-largest source of remittances. They have strengthened both of our nations, and serve as a valuable bridge between our societies.

Your country is an example of what is possible when a nation founded on democratic principles opens a pathway for pluralistic and entrepreneurial citizens to pursue a better life for their families, a better path for their country, and a better future for their planet.

Today, I would like to add just a few words to what Ted Kennedy said 44 years ago. America still cares – about that there can be no doubt. And to his timeless address I would simply add: *Bangladesh matters.*

Bangladesh is the eighth most-populous country in the world and central to the stability of a region that is home to nearly two billion people.

Bangladesh contributes more international peacekeepers than any other country, helping bring security to people's lives from Ethiopia to East Timor, including in some of the most difficult places on earth.

Bangladesh is at the forefront of addressing and mitigating one of the world's great challenges – climate change.

As the world's third-largest Muslim majority country, Bangladesh is an exceptional example of what a tolerant, pluralistic, and moderate nation can accomplish.

And just look at what Bangladesh has accomplished in a few short decades:

- You have reduced the poverty rate from over half of the population to less than a third;
- You have achieved self-sufficiency in food production;
- Your maternal and child health programs achieved the Millennium Development Goals, and have ensured that a higher proportion of children can get an education, receive proper health care, and escape the shackles of poverty.

You have had partners in these accomplishments, and the United States is proud to be one of them. But your achievements are your own and the product of a simple fact: Bangladeshis are some of the most resilient, ambitious, and entrepreneurial people on this planet.

You can see it everywhere – amidst the bustling traffic on the streets, in the thriving trade across world-renowned markets, and among the humming machines of the factories.

I'd like to talk about those factories for a moment. The potential of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry is the envy of much of the developing world – in 1980 it was the 76th biggest garment exporter; today it ranks second, just behind China. It employs over 4 million workers – the vast majority of them women – and adds over 20 billion dollars to the economy every year. It is the engine that drives Bangladesh's growth, and the foundation of the country's ascent up the economic value chain.

It is also the foundation of our commercial relationship with Bangladesh – the United States is the largest single-country destination of Bangladesh's garment exports. No one buys more garments from Bangladesh than we do. Take a stroll inside any shopping mall in America, and you will see labels everywhere that read "Made in Bangladesh".

Just as the logo on the outside of a shirt – be it a sports team or a popular fashion line – is a brand, so is the label on the inside. That's why it's so important to build a strong and respected "Brand Bangladesh" where workers' rights and safety are protected. And that's why we have invested our time and energy, together with other governments, international organizations, and the private sector, in helping the government of Bangladesh improve building safety, fire safety, and the protection of workers' rights.

In this regard, it is our purpose to work with Bangladesh's government to restore GSP benefits. Bangladesh has made important progress in meeting the GSP action plan's objectives – especially in inspections, closures, construction, and upgrades of factories. The safety of the worksite, however, needs to be matched by the ability of workers to exercise their rights to organize, freely associate and bargain collectively. We will continue to work with Bangladesh on these issues, because not only are empowered workers better positioned to ensure their own

safety, they're also more productive at their jobs – which means greater efficiency, larger output, higher profits, increased competitiveness, and – most importantly – can be linked to higher standards of living and more inclusive economic growth.

As I mentioned, the vast majority of garment workers are women. And those jobs have helped many women feed, clothe, and educate their children, or save up enough to buy a house or open a business back in their home villages. The more women who can enter and safely advance in that industry, the better off the next generation of all Bangladeshis will be, and the next, and the next.

And, thanks in large part to the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh has made enormous strides in gender equality and women's empowerment. Indeed, much of Bangladesh's success has come from making women central to its development agenda. As the saying goes, "if you educate a woman, you educate a family."

That's why we've made women's empowerment a cornerstone of our cooperation, because we know how important it is for Bangladesh's future success. And there are still tremendous gains to be made from reducing gender-based violence and ending early and forced marriages – which have terrible social, economic, and health consequences that carry on to the next generation.

Academic studies show that when women are economically empowered, the physical well-being and productive potential of their children increase dramatically. And there is no doubt that the global economy's future will be largely driven by technology and the Internet. The government of Bangladesh has wisely taken note of these phenomena, and invested in over 4,000 digital centers to promote women's leadership in the digital economy. Many entrepreneurs are now opening internet cafes where women can connect, learn, transact, innovate, and even engage in the burgeoning sector of digital microwork, which has fascinating potential.

Like the United States, Bangladesh has gained much from connecting its economy to global supply chains and markets. But the United States also shares borders with two of our top three trading partners. Trade with our neighbors in North America is worth over one trillion dollars, and sustains tens of millions of jobs throughout the continent. Without regional trade, we would arguably not be the global power we are today.

Of course, it wasn't easy getting to where we are – we had to build infrastructure, industries, and an institutional architecture that allowed trade to move freely, quickly, and profitably. With similar efforts, Bangladesh can become a leading economy in South Asia, serving as a manufacturing powerhouse and a hub for the movement of goods and people among the countries of South and Southeast Asia.

Recent months have shown us some spectacular examples of the kinds of efficiencies that can be achieved with greater connectivity. For seaborne trade from Bangladesh to India, cargo ships used to have to sail from Chittagong south to Singapore, then west, around the southern tip of the subcontinent, and all the way to Mumbai – a journey of over 3,300 nautical miles. But soon, thanks to an agreement between India and Bangladesh, merchants can send their goods directly from Chittagong to Chennai along the Indo-Bangla coastal shipping route, meaning a huge cut in sailing time, costs, and carbon emissions.

On land, the recent completion of an agreement on motor vehicles between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, means that people and goods can make it to Kolkata from India's northeast by going through Bangladesh instead of around it, reducing travel time by more than half!

While these are just the most recent developments, Bangladesh has long been a leader in connecting the region, as shown by its hosting of the BIMSTEC secretariat – an important organization that brings together the countries on the Bay of Bengal's littoral.

Bangladesh has also doubled its exports in the past five years, and is on track to become a leading economy in South Asia and a gateway to the thriving economies of Southeast Asia – markets that are worth over two-and-a-half trillion dollars and home to over 600 million consumers. The United States is an enthusiastic supporter and implementer of this vision, which we are helping to realize through our Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor initiative.

We're committed to economic connectivity because it is the key to regional prosperity, stability, and opportunity for the American economy. Many economists predict that by the year 2050, Asia will comprise 50% of global GDP. It is clear that we are at the beginning of an Indo-Pacific century, and the United States, as a Pacific nation, will play its part in this story. We will

manufacture, we will trade, and we will promote and uphold the norms and rules that have ensured the global growth of the past 65-plus years.

And the United States will continue to be a partner in Bangladesh's economic growth through trade and investment: we're already one of Bangladesh's largest foreign investors, and in the past two years our two-way trade has grown steadily, to more than \$6 billion.

We are also working together in other important areas. Over the years, we've strengthened and expanded our security dialogue and our military-to-military cooperation. Our soldiers and sailors are training together on land and at sea, and our decades-long peacekeeping partnership with Bangladesh has proven an unalloyed success – Bangladesh has such an expertise in peacekeeping that it now trains other nations' troops.

Our goal is to help the Bangladeshi military achieve its goals of being a lynchpin of regional stability, securing the strategic sea lanes of the Indian Ocean from crime and conflict, and continuing to provide disaster relief when its neighbors are in need – just as it has in the past with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Burma.

Bangladesh is also an example to the world when it comes to confronting the challenges of climate change. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's efforts on this were recently recognized by the United Nations, which bestowed upon her its highest environmental accolade – the Champion of the Earth award for policy leadership.

The danger we face from severe storms, floods, fires, heatwaves, and droughts is going to get worse before it gets better, and preparation is key. So we hope to work with Bangladesh to build better warning systems and crisis management centers, further reducing the impact of severe storms and extreme weather. We want to help save more lives, while further reducing the economic impacts of natural disasters.

Natural disasters aren't the only things that disrupt economies – so do instability and insecurity. We know that trade and investment do much better when there is peace and stability. Capital, as the saying goes, is a coward. What builds peace and stability in a society?

First and foremost, is the rule of law and law enforcement. Bangladesh has a strong police force, one that protects all Bangladeshis and helps the citizens of this country to live free and thrive. I want to thank the Dhaka police for the tremendous job they have been doing to protect our diplomats and their families.

My hat goes off to those – quite a few of whom are in the room today – who have made it their career to protect and serve. And in democratic societies like ours, that also means protecting citizens’ ability to exercise their political and civil liberties, especially the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression.

Second, is tolerance and respect for our fellow citizens. These are the basis of the open society that defines our democracies. We have learned that nations achieve their full potential only when national debates – even disagreements – are channeled through peaceful, open, and unhindered democratic processes.

And Bangladesh has sought to be a global example of the strengths of tolerance, inclusiveness, and democracy. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms lies at the foundation of a stable society, and was at the heart of Bangladesh’s struggle for independence.

Finally, a determination to protect our societies and our heritage. The United States and Bangladesh share a relationship built on Senator Kennedy’s dedication to those who strive for self-determination, democracy, and dignity. And we are working toward a common vision, to support a Bangladesh that is inclusive, prosperous, and secure.

Violent extremists and terrorists do not share that vision. Rather, they wish for a Bangladesh that is divided, weakened, and chaotic. They want to destroy centuries-long traditions of religious tolerance and communal harmony. They want a society that does not cherish literature, music and the arts – as Bangladesh long has – but one that languishes in violence, intolerance, and fear. And they seek to accomplish these ends through savagery and terror.

As we’ve seen in both our countries, including most recently in San Bernardino, California, *we* share a common vulnerability to this threat, but we also share a firm resolve to defeat it. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s administration has shown that resolve, and the U.S. government

intends to expand our counterterrorism cooperation with Bangladesh. We will prevail, in the words of President Obama, “by being strong and smart, resilient and relentless.”

The world is growing more connected, and what happens to the citizens of one country inevitably affects the citizens of another. This is a global challenge, and the United States stands with you in your efforts to counter violent extremism and fight terrorism. We are committed to helping Bangladesh continue its march into the bright future it has envisioned for itself.

To borrow another quote from the late Senator Kennedy: in this fight, “we are all Bangladeshis, we are all Americans, and we all share the great alliance of humanity.”

We have accomplished much together, but there is much more to be done.

Together, we must continue to create a future where children can grow up healthy and educated; where women have equal opportunities as men to learn, work and succeed; where citizens can exercise their rights and freedoms without fear of harm; and where we all, regardless of religious and ethnic origins, can live together in peace.

Whether it is climate change, security, women’s empowerment, or development, the past 40 years have shown that the United States and Bangladesh can accomplish amazing things when we work together. And the next 40 years will be no different, because our partnership is one whose strength, resilience, and potential will only grow with time.

Thank you.

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**As Prepared for delivery*